

Editorial

Can we speed up the online publishing process? And who will pay for it, anyway?

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Published: 27 May 2002

Cancer Cell International 2002, **2**:5

Received: 20 May 2002

Accepted: 27 May 2002

This article is available from: <http://www.cancerci.com/content/2/1/5>

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Some current bottlenecks

CCI is now getting some excellent papers. Part of Biomed Central's policy – to which we fully subscribe – is that papers accepted following peer reviewing and revision to ensure the highest quality shall be published on our website as quickly as possible, with free access worldwide. A turnaround time of 50 days should now be well within the norm, and may well fall to nearer 30–35 days. For exceptionally good papers, this time delay may be very much shorter (technically it is possible to publish within a day), and the mechanism is in place to achieve these remarkable times. However, to date, CCI simply cannot boast an improved turnaround time. Apart from some gremlins that had to be sorted out in the publishing process for niche journals, delay between submission and publication of good papers sadly remains much as for "conventional" journals. The two main sticking points are (a) **peer reviewing** and (b) **author resubmission**.

Taking the first, the rapid way in which a submitted paper goes straight to a private website means that we direct referees attention to it almost instantly by emailing them the private URL details. This is still a novelty for some reviewers, who no longer have a hardcopy of the manuscript on their desk as a constant reminder of the request made upon them. We hope that, as everyone becomes more accustomed to handling email, reviewers will oblige us by *acknowledging receipt of the URL message and sending in reports within 7 to 10 days*.

On the other matter, it is not always clear to **authors** where their responsibility lies in on-line publishing. The most important thing is for an *author to realise that he or she is fully responsible for loading the manuscript in its entirety, in complete conformity with the requirements laid down by BMC, especially in file formats and style*. Not only once, but at times when the article is altered for any reason, it is the *author's responsibility to resubmit the new version without delay*. We have no mechanism at present for reminding authors that we await a new figure, table, or revised text file. We simply believe that most changes that need to be made to a manuscript can be done very quickly, and that authors in their own interest will update their files at the earliest opportunity; procrastination simply delays progress. It is of little concern how many times this exercise is done because we always follow the latest version, although we rather it was done just prior to final acceptance than at every occasion when a comma is added or an excess space deleted.

Submission charges

The Varmus Principle is that primary research papers should be published online so that they become immediately and freely accessible to readers. Publication has its costs, especially where extensive reviewing, editing and revision has to be done to ensure that quality is not compromised. But who pays? This issue has not been satisfactorily resolved. No firm decision could have been taken, because the ways in which readers, writers, institutions, li-

libraries and funding agencies would react to either the public or the private sector carrying out on-line publishing were unknowns until we got the process firmly established. An income stream is clearly necessary to sustain the operation, which we now see as unlikely to be adequately generated by advertising on our pages, or similar ploys. It is recognised in all quarters, however, that the "product" of research is a valid, creditable publication. The final step, after all the research and writing up has been done, is for the product to become readily available (the prime function of any scientific or medical journal) to the scientific and medical fraternities. Thus its production should be seen as legitimate expenditure that comes from the source of funding of the research that supported the research in the first instance. Indeed, costing ought to be automatically included in any grant application, although a few agencies are still clearly unhappy that about this. An alternative is that access to online websites is made readily available from Institutions of Higher Learning to their employees and students. Many institutions have therefore become affiliated to the online publishing house, paying a subscription that allows any associate working under their institutional umbrella to publish his or her work without any further fee. For those remaining outside these institutions, there will be a flat submission fee of 500 US dollars. Where authors clearly find this difficult for economic reasons (as in third world countries)*, the fee can be referred, reduced or waived, but where people can pay, we hope that this once-only fee per manuscript will be seen as an assured way of having the privilege of publishing so that all your colleagues can get free and immediate access to their work on their side, and that we might be sufficiently well reimbursed to continue in the future to provide this service to science. Sponsorship might lighten this load off CCI, but we have to wait to see whether philanthropy enters the online publishing scene in the way it has supported libraries and other facilities of higher learning in the past. To read more about this, please go to *Cancer Cell International's* FAQ's pages where the introduction and reasons for submission charges are discussed [<http://www.cancerci.com/info/about/>].

* Please take careful note that there are ways in which less privileged countries (a total of about 67) can gain subsidies to assist in publication costs, provided the Varmus principle is upheld. The Open Society Institute (OSI) in Budapest controls funds made available through the generosity of the Soros Foundation, which allows authors from countries such as Nigeria, Vietnam, Bulgaria, and 64 others to apply for help in getting manuscripts published. We ask you to direct your attention to the controller of this funding agency in Budapest, Ms Melissa Hagemann at the following email address: mhagemann@sorosny.org

We ourselves are in negotiation with OSI, and through them the process may be simplified by their providing direct cover to us for the submission fees of manuscripts emanating from countries on their list.

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